Accomplishing Relative and Supreme View

A Teaching from Jetsunma Ahkön Lhamo

In order to understand the importance of accomplishing relative and supreme view, we must first look at some of the pitfalls that practitioners face.

When we enter onto the spiritual path we often times feel we've been reborn or that somehow things have changed for us. We take as our proof the fact that we're having some kind of internal or emotional experience. It is not the ultimate experience. It is not enlightenment.

We may even be misled into thinking that all of our problems have magically dissipated, or that we have heard enough Dharma to have some kind of fantastic understanding. For instance, we may hear that the Buddha says that our ego or the assumption of the reality of self nature as being inherently real is a delusion. We may hear that our true nature is the uncontrived, luminous, spacious, primordial wisdom state, free of any limitation or contrivance. And upon hearing that, we may think "Well, that's it then; that's the truth. Nothing I see is very real, and all of it must just be abandoned and put down. And now that I know that, I will immediately become aware of the conditionless state." We may even sit down and contrive or compose an experience in our meditation that makes us think that we have "gotten it." But in truth, after hearing one teaching or even some teaching, we cannot sit down and compose an experience of enlightenment.

The experience of enlightenment cannot be composed. Because it is a conditionless state, it cannot be composed of conditions, and that would be the only way it could be composed. The state of enlightenment results when there is the complete and unqualified cessation of the belief in self nature being inherently real. It is not possible, therefore, to have that experience immediately.

There are stories during the time of the Buddha -- people would hear the Buddha's teaching and immediately burst into realization and become arhats. But that was a different time when the Buddha actually appeared on the earth. The karmic material that composed that time was very different from the karmic material of today. This is a time when Buddha appears in the guise of our own root teachers -the root teachers being the extension of the Buddha's miraculous activity. It is a difficult time of intense contraction, a time when all of our karma is extremely compressed. So in this day it is very difficult to come into realization. Yet, on the Vajrayana path, realization is possible because this path was developed specifically to be most productive during a time when karma is extremely contracted and compacted. The method that is implemented in Vajrayana is extremely useful, but it must be used. We cannot hear the teachings of the Buddha and then sit down and think we have had an experience. Yet students do become deluded in this way and make mistakes.

To avoid such pitfalls, we must understand that there are two views that must be respected. There is the relative view and the extraordinary or ultimate view. We must understand and accomplish both of these views.

The relative view cannot be denied. You cannot reach enlightenment through denial. You cannot say, "Okay, I have learned that self nature does not exist; therefore nothing I do is of any importance; nothing I see has any meaning. There is no reason to be in the world, and if I am in the world there is no condition that has any true depth or import." If you think like that, you are on the dangerous path to nihilism, a path of supreme ignorance. In order to attain any wisdom we must understand the relative view of how condition arises. To understand relative view is to understand cause-and-effect relationships.

We must first accept our condition. It has become fashionable in the spiritual methods of the day to develop a paper-dragon confidence in oneself that is completely inappropriate on the path of Dharma. We are suppose to look at each other and say, "You're perfect just the way you are," or "I see the Divine in you. I don't see any problems; no hatred, greed and ignorance," and look meaningfully into one another's eyes. This is considered to be an empowering experience. Well, according to the Buddha's teaching, this approach is ridiculous. It doesn't work because it provides no way out of cyclic existence. It is equal to trying to get across a room with obstacles in it by putting on blinders. Taking that approach, we are guaranteed to stumble and fall. We have no way to see what to walk around, jump over, duck under, or avoid. How can we be competent by using that method? Thus we must attain the wisdom of relative view. If you feel inclined to deny relative view, take a pin and stick it in your hand. Then ask yourself if the experience is real. It is real. You cannot deny that it's real.

Relative experience is real because you are experiencing it. If you try to gloss over hatred, greed and ignorance in your mindstream, how will you be equipped the next time something happens to you that you feel strongly responsive toward? How will you have any real understanding of yourself? How will you know what your desires are, so that one by one you can combat them? How will you know what to do when someone mistreats you? Will you be prepared to react with kindness?

We must understand the condition of samsara, of cyclic existence. If everything is so glorious here, if we are so free of hatred, greed and ignorance, if everything is so perfect, then how do we explain the problems of the world? How do we explain war? How do we explain the times that you were unkind to others? How do we explain that we will get old and die? I think the most exhausted and fearful people in the world are the ones that are faking it.

The Buddha teaches us that we must thoroughly renounce cyclic existence. For some of us that means taking robes, for others of us that means developing a deep, abiding and truthful understanding of the faults of cyclic existence. Within our minds we must be warriors, we must be on guard, realizing the faults of cyclic existence and acting accordingly. We cannot think that we will be able to achieve realization if we do not truthfully see the faults of cyclic existence and renounce them thoroughly. We cannot think that we will take ourselves in hand and really produce the causes of enlightenment if we do not understand the faults of our own minds. It takes courage to look at oneself squarely in the eye and to take action based on what one sees. It's a very, very difficult method. Yet it does not produce the exhaustion that faking it does. It does not produce the sorrow. Ultimately, it produces result.

If we have understood the faults of cyclic existence, we then will want to take refuge in those things that are antidotes to the faults we have seen. On the Vajrayana path, the relative objects of refuge are the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and the Lama as representative of these three. These are the relative objects of refuge because they have appeared in the world. The Buddha appeared in the world, the Dharma is the method that appears in the world, the Sangha is the community that appears in the world, and the Lama is the doctor and implementer that appears in the world. Through these objects we can practice the antidotes to our relative sorrows and eliminate the poisons in our mindstreams.

In addition to the relative view, we must also understand the ultimate view, because if we only understand the relative view, we will never really understand the point of Dharma. To understand the point we must listen to the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha teaches that the supreme object of refuge is one's own primordial wisdom or Buddha nature. That nature is not something that must be built or created. It is innate. It is the empty state. It is the primordial lucency which is conditionless awareness, the uncontrived view.

The uncontrived primordial state is the fruition, the result of Dharma. It is also the ground or the potential, and it is the method. However, even so, you cannot as a practitioner intelligently think that you can sit down and say, "Okay, that's the state, let's just do it. Let's just be like that." That would be faking it.

Because we exist in samsara, where all of our view arises from cause-and-effect relationships and habitual tendencies, we must use a method that also arises in samsara, one that is based on cause-and-effect relationships to purify the habitual tendencies that keep us bound in relative view. That is the method of Dharma.

How do we practice the basic understanding of our condition? By taking the time to look honestly and having the courage to really see. We do have hatred in our mindstreams; we do have ignorance in our mindstreams; we do have desire in our mindstreams. To the degree that we have taken up strong weapons against those poisons, that's how strong we are. To the degree that we do not delude ourselves about our condition, that's how clear we are. Eventually, by sincerely practicing in this way, the supreme view will naturally be attained.

How then can we attain that conditionless state? How can we awaken to the supreme nature? We will awaken naturally when all the hatred, greed and ignorance are completely pacified. It's like clear glass which is naturally transparent when it is cleaned off. All we have to do is clean it -- that's our job. It's a hard job -- a very hard job -- and it starts by being truthful with ourselves. It starts by understanding the condition of samsara and by grieving that there is so much suffering. It comes by working very hard to see ourselves truthfully until we are sick to death of what we see. It comes by sometimes losing courage and then having to learn how to have courage again. It comes by grieving again and again at our shortcomings and by confessing. It comes by practicing really, really hard; by achieving merit. By working hard to antidote these strong habitual tendencies that we have had since time out of mind -selfishness, self absorption, fixation on ego, anger, jealousy, pride, desire. We all have them all, every one of us.

Sometimes when new students come to Dharma and they hear this, they think, "Gee, this is a tough path. I'm not sure I want to do this. This doesn't feel particularly wonderful." Well, you're right. It doesn't feel particularly wonderful to know that you're stuck in samsara; but knowing that you're stuck in samsara is the first step. It doesn't feel particularly wonderful to feel the pain of sentient beings, but recognizing the pain of sentient beings, and thinking that it is unbearable is the first step toward a truly compassionate mind. You have to practice like that. It's tough, but it's the only kind of method that produces results.

Many students in this center are practicing Ngundro or preliminary practice. That practice is geared toward awakening us to relative view, awakening us to the condition of samsara, and then giving us the tools or means to begin to pacify the five senses, our habitual tendencies and the hatred, greed and ignorance within our mindstreams. Ngondro is very hard. It requires the accumulation of a hundred thousand repetitions of five different practices. And in the accumulation of Guru Yoga, more than a million repetitions must be accumulated of a certain mantra and visualization. Why so much? Well, we have been revolving in this relative view since beginningless time. We have had a long time to create habitual tendencies -- these are deep habits. Because there's no end to the self absorption we have experienced, no end to the hatred, greed and ignorance that we have seen, we have to apply a very strong antidote, one that will outweigh all of our past experience.

All of the great lamas who have achieved realization in the Vajrayana path have done so by beginning with Ngundro. All. They have done so by taking out those poisons by the root. And we are no exception. We must also accomplish the method. It is a jewel sitting right in front of us.

Do not fool yourself into thinking that you can go from one spiritual experience to another, tasting a little here and there and not applying the method. Please do not delude yourself into thinking that you can simply sit down and receive some empowerment and bliss-out on the glory of it and not apply the method. Please do not think that you can walk through life and that enlightenment will naturally occur. These things are not so. You must apply the method, thoroughly and with courage.

When I look for a student that I try my best to benefit, I look for that student having two qualities: courage and the willingness to change. That's it. And the first way students must change is to stop having faith in the things of cyclic existence, those things that leave them hopeless and without recourse. They must learn to see the faults of cyclic existence and have faith instead in the Three Precious Jewels as the supreme objects of refuge. That's the first change that must be made, and it is a very, very arduous task. The only way to start is to start today. This is the beginning of the method.